

THE EARLY LIFE OF EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK

BY CHARLES KASSEL

THROUGH the issues of the present magazine for February and March, 1922, March, August and September, 1923, March and July, 1924, April and September, 1925, March and November, 1926, April, 1927, and January, 1928, we traced the story of the author of *Proteus* from the days of the Unitarian pastorate at Dover, New Hampshire, through the anti-slavery agitation and the Civil War, but his youth and young manhood we passed over, preferring to withhold the earlier installments until the extraordinary character of his later life should earn for those less striking chapters an interest which otherwise they could not have possessed.

The Civil War was now at an end and a new and less dramatic epoch was dawning filled with tasks of reconstruction in the Southern states, with which also our minister was to enjoy no unimportant connection. The point seems a fitting one for a retrospect over the formative years in the life we have followed, and here therefore, we turn back the pages of this biography and take up the passages thus far omitted.

Rarely indeed do we fail to find in the childhood and youth and early manhood of a remarkable individual the roots of his afterlife. In human experience, as in the realm of inanimate nature, there is seed-time and harvest, but what is sown is sown through silent years and the season of flower and fruitage awaits often the stimulus of some stern and tragic call.

The springs of heroic action in the case of the subject of our narrative—as in the case of many, doubtless, to whom the liberating challenge never comes—lay partly sealed, but living and vibrant none the less, within the deeps of his being. The slavery crisis and the Civil War, with their powerful appeal to generous and idealistic natures, wrought with him, as with other and more distinguished figures in that great struggle, the magic change from scholar to crusader.

It is a mocking commentary upon the vanity of renown that fame with its blare and blather so often enfolds the mediocre, lending an illusive dignity to their actions and utterances and ill-formed views, while the individual of larger genius languishes unknown—unknown, at times, even to himself. An awakening and advancing humanity, perhaps, pursuing the spiral round to racial excellence, may learn, in the slow lapse of ages, the true test of greatness. Meanwhile, the thoughtful student, thumbing the endless pages of biography, must continue to moralize upon the strange caprice of fate which lifts into a garish light some inconsequential name while a lordly nature, bedraggled in the net of circumstance and carrying unopened within it a well-spring of boundless good for human kind, wages a bitter and fruitless battle for recognition, and even, at times, for existence.

Edwin Miller Wheelock was born in the City of New York in 1829. He was probably of Welsh descent. The father was a chandler in New York City, whose diary and account books—no uninteresting relics of those days—were among the possessions of Mr. Charles B. Wheelock of Boston, recently deceased, son of the subject of our sketch. They were people, evidently, in moderately good circumstances. After the birth of their four boys and four girls the parents moved from the City of New York and took up their residence at Rosedale, near Ithaca in the same state, where they continued to live until their death and where the children grew to maturity. Of the daughters two became in succession the wives of Prof. Stebbins of Cornell University, one died unmarried and of the fourth no record is in the hands of the present writer. The sons had interesting careers. One went out to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in its early days, another had a checkered life as a financier, and the third wandered over the world, landing finally in one of the South American Republics where he suffered egregious ill-treatment for which, later, through our own government, he recovered an indemnity.

The remaining brother, Edwin—evidently the most promising of the four—was destined to a different life from all the others. He was intended by his parents, it would seem, for the profession of the law since we find him at Harvard studying for that profession and graduating, indeed, from the department of law; but we infer that during his Harvard days he came into contact with Unitarianism, his parents having belonged to a more orthodox church, perhaps the Methodist, and this touch with the more liberal faith awakened the

latent bent in his nature toward the ministry. He pursued the course in theology at the Divinity School of this University and we learn from the records of the American Unitarian Association at Boston that he graduated from the Divinity School in the class of 1856.

Of the questioning nature of the young graduate from his earliest years, where religious problems were concerned, we find an interesting proof in a chance reminiscence of his childhood days culled from one of the later discourses. He had been present, he tells us, at a revival of the familiar type and the burden of the revivalist's exhortation had been the tragic death of a young sinner who had attended a dance in preference to a religious service.

It is apparent that the imagination of the child was powerfully wrought upon by the tragedy, seemingly providential. The thought, as he tells us, haunted his soul and in the darkness and stillness of the night the childish mind was terror-stricken by the vengefulness of the Almighty, who, for so light an offense, could inflict so dreadful a punishment.

When morning dawned he made a confidant of his mother. How did the preacher know, he asked, that the awful death was a penalty for the young man's levity and that the tortures of hell were awaiting him? The mother, herself evidently creedbound and undisturbed by such questions, tried to hush the child's doubts. The evangelist knew, she assured him, and to question was wicked. The boy, we may fancy, withdrew into himself with his thoughts, sufficiently fearful of the consequences of doubt but still skeptical none the less.

Of his life at Harvard, his associations there and the traits of character which may have marked him to his fellow students, we are without distinct memorials, just as there is denied to us the details of his life during early boyhood and young manhood. As regards his character we glean something, indeed, from the testimony of those who knew him, delivered at his ordination as a minister at Dover, New Hampshire, and this gives us an insight of no mean value; but aside from this we are without material, and the next mile-stone of his life, which our data permits us to register, is his installation as minister of the First Unitarian Church at Dover, New Hampshire, on the 7th day of January, 1857.

Dover was then, perhaps, a town of some four or five thousands, though it had been founded as early as 1623. One might venture

the guess that the Unitarian movement at Dover had enjoyed a fitful and spasmodic life at intervals during the century and now, for some years, had been languishing or was quite dead. In the Newberry Library at Chicago we find the *Collections of Dover, New Hampshire, Historical Society*, of which Vol. 1 shows the marriage-records of the First Unitarian Church from 1829 to 1850, and this gives us a basis for the belief that during these twenty-one years the Unitarian faith had claimed an organized representation in that community. It is evident, however, that for some years the movement had been without a head and without an organized body, for in the address of Rev. Andrew P. Peabody at the ordination service of the young minister, which we find in the Boston Library and which is catalogued there, we see a reference to the event as the beginning of an entirely new ministry in the community. The field was evidently one of rather uncertain promise. Even now, as we are informed from the headquarters of the American Unitarian Association at Boston, the place is without a Unitarian ministry or movement, and the records of the Association are without the names of any of the young minister's parishioners from whom details of his labors there might be gained.

Whether the soil, however, which he had been sent to till was lean or rich in promise meant little, doubtless, in the eyes of the youthful clergyman. It was the fact of the field being given him alone that must have seemed of supreme importance. The occasion of the ordination itself appears to have been no inauspicious one and the fact of the publication of the sermons and addresses by Crosby, Nichols & Company of Boston, who had been since 1846 the agents of the Unitarian Association and the publishers of the *Christian Examiner* and other Unitarian periodicals, is token of the importance of the ordination in the eyes of those who conducted it. The ordination address was delivered by Rev. Andrew P. Peabody, the charge by Rev. Convers Francis and the right-hand of fellowship was extended by Rev. F. Frothingham.

It may be well to pause for a glance at the place which these gentlemen filled in the public life of their time. It was no inconspicuous group who stood thus with the subject of our story upon the threshold of his ministerial life and ushered him formally into the career which for more than forty years was to claim his loyal and earnest devotion.

Andrew P. Peabody was at that time the editor and proprietor

of the North American Review—the leading organ of enlightened opinion in America—and at the same time fulfilled the duties of pastor of the South Parish Unitarian Church at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. A few years later he became Preacher to Harvard University and retained that position for twenty-one years, becoming the author during the interval of important works upon Christianity and moral philosophy as well as of a volume of Harvard reminiscences published in 1881.

Convers Francis was Professor in Harvard Divinity School, which place he had held since 1842 and continued to occupy until his death in 1863. He had been a minister at Watertown, and he had assisted at the ordination of Theodore Parker and preached the sermon upon that occasion. At Cambridge, during his incumbency of the *Parkman Professorship* after the resignation of Henry Ware, Jr., he taught *Ecclesiastical History*, *Natural Theology*, *Ethics*, *The Composition of Sermons and Instruction in the Duties of a Pastor*. In his work on *Boston Unitarianism*, Octavius Brooks Frothingham gives this characterization of Francis—a characterization it is well to keep in mind in view of the undoubted influence of the personality of Francis upon the young men who studied under him:

“I have elsewhere described him as one of those rare men whom too few appreciate; a liberal scholar in the best sense of the phrase. He was at heart a transcendentalist and reformer but he could not break the ties that bound him to his sect and he did not feel the necessity of doing so, his theory of influence recommending to him the wisdom of preserving existing relations. He said once that he who defied public opinion, like the man who spits in the wind, spits in his own face. He was an enormous reader of books. He was criticized as being too all-sided and not sufficiently commital.”

The charge of Dr. Francis contained this notable tribute to the young minister and this prophecy of the future:

“I cannot deny myself the pleasure of saying that my acquaintance with you during your theological education has surrounded your entrance into the ministry with the fairest and brightest hopes in my mind.*** As long as you live be it your main endeavor to stand in the line of those by whom the moral glory is received and transmitted from age to age—that brotherhood of the faithful which commenced with those who first heard the Great Teacher.”

Throughout the whole address, with its fine feeling, a distinct personal note resounds, evidencing the high place young Wheelock held in the affection and esteem of the speaker. The *Right Hand of*

Fellowship by the Rev. A. F. Frothingham was no less an inspiring word, admonishing of the trials which should come in the endeavor to live true to the ideals of a pastor's life. Both these utterances must have touched deep chords in the heart of the youthful and inexperienced but earnest and enthusiastic initiate and as we follow the course of his life it is easy to see that the loftiest sentiments in these addresses found a splendid, if modest and unobtrusive, expression in his career.

The address of Dr. Peabody, it may not be amiss to add, was, despite that distinguished man's liberality of view, peculiarly orthodox in tone, discountenancing the tendency to discard authority in religion and to suffer the preacher to rely upon his own spiritual intuitions—something quite at war with all the thought of the young minister in his later life; but the presence of the Editor of the *North American Review* was an excellent omen and spoke eloquently of the high consideration the young man had enjoyed at the hands of his instructors for talent and scholarship.

Among the manuscript sermons left by Mr. Wheelock after his death is the original of the ordination discourse delivered by him at this time. This sermon lacks the literary beauty which, some two years later, began to mark his discourses, and there is not the breadth of thought noticeable in the manuscripts of several years after; but there are noteworthy passages nonetheless and one in particular we shall quote at length for its proof of the intellectual characteristic to which the whole course of his life was to bear conspicuous testimony:

"He who enters upon the high office of the Christian ministry," we read, "must be *called* to it, or sincerely believe himself so to be."***** He must see, or believe that he sees, the hand of Providence leading, guiding and preparing him to be a servant in his Holy Temple. He must be sure that he did not set out to attain this end for any selfish motive of his own, but that while simply and humbly following the line of duty he had been led step by step until he found himself *here*."

Developing this thought he adds:

"We believe that every one is formed by the Creator for some distinct and special place in the great society of human beings and is prepared for some peculiar use in that society, and we also believe that if men would not oppose the divine order by their own blind and evil desires each man would be led into his own proper place and to his own peculiar use, and we conclude that if any one is ready to give himself up to the leading of Providence and is willing to enter upon any course which seems that of duty he will be led or called into his proper office."

The mystical feeling of an over-brooding Providence thus evidenced so early in our young pastor's life was plainly a fundamental thing in his thought, and the course of his life, as we shall follow it in these pages, will amply demonstrate that he lacked neither the faith nor the courage to live out to the uttermost the belief which breathes from these passages. Already, doubtless, he had made a study of Swedenborg and of such of the writings of the poet and mystic Thomas Lake Harris as had been published, but it is not difficult to believe that the faith in a guiding Providence expressed in this sermon was organic in his mental makeup and that it would have found utterance in his words and expression in his deeds had Swedenborg and Harris remained strangers to him throughout life.

The remarkable man last named the young minister had doubtless met before this time. In 1855 Mr. Harris started upon a lecture-tour explanatory of the doctrines with which his name is associated and all evidences point to the conclusion that Mr. Wheelock came into touch with him even before that time and while the latter was pastor of a New York church. A powerful and impressive speaker, possessed of a glowing eloquence rich in the graces of rhetoric, and endowed with a rare personal magnetism, it is easy to understand that the young subject of these pages should have been attracted to him, his nature being charged doubtless with a native mysticism that was propitious to the influence of a personality such as that of Thomas Lake Harris.

This meeting, whatever its date, could not but have led young Wheelock into an intimate study of Swedenborgianism and of Harris' own poems and prose writings. *The Lyric of the Morning Land* had been published in 1858, the *Wisdom of the Angels* in 1856, the *Epic of the Starry Heavens* in 1854. Mr. Harris had been drawn into the spiritualistic movement about 1850, and these early poems were the fruit of his participation in that movement. It was the second year of the pastorate at Dover that Harris' *Arcana of Christianity Genesis* appeared, but the earlier writings and the personal association with Harris told deeply from the beginning upon the thought of the eager and impressionable young preacher and we are not surprised when we find the early sermons at Dover discovering the fact in tone and phrase. It was altogether fitting that this the greatest influence of his life, and one which was to lend color and tendency to his every thought and action, should

have made its impress thus early upon him, nor is it a trifling testimony to the power of the personality behind these writings that half a century's span should have left Mr. Wheelock as devoted and loyal a friend and disciple as he had been in the glow and enthusiasm of young manhood.

In the ordination sermon the young minister speaks not only with respect but with affection of those forms and ceremonies which even in the Unitarian Church were still common. Thus, in addition to the parochial duties of visiting his people, rejoicing with them in prosperity and consoling them in suffering and adversity, it is his, we are informed, to administer the ordinances of the church.

"He is to take the smiling infant in his arms and while it looks up in innocent wonder in his face gently to mark it with the Christian sign—that sign which will have power to bring angelic guardians more closely around it."

So again :

"He is to distribute the consecrated bread and wine, those symbols of that spiritual food which is to nourish our souls unto life eternal."

Time was to be when the growing thought of the hero of these pages was to reject the rite of baptism with the communion service and all ceremonies else as vain and empty forms hiding the beauty of religion in its native purity and weighing down the religious feeling in the heart; but that time was not yet.

Emerson, nearly thirty years before, while settled as Colleague at the Second Church in Boston, had preached a sermon on the Lord's Supper which was reprobated by the larger part of his congregation and which resulted in his resigning his charge. In this sermon the great transcendentalist's aversion even to the moderate forms of the Unitarian church was more than intimated and his unwillingness plainly expressed to accept the customary view of the communion service. He would, he had explained, continue the service only with the understanding that it was without the slightest sacramental meaning and at best a mere commemoration and upon the condition that he himself should not be asked to partake of the bread and wine; but this was too great a heresy for his people to approve and he left the ministry, resolved perhaps to seek a pulpit more congenial to his thought but only to find in another year or two that he had become doubtful of public prayer as being, too, perhaps, a mere form deadening to the spirit. So it was that in 1838—the

year of the famous address before the senior class in Divinity College at Harvard in which his rejection of the Incarnation was voiced to the amazement and horror even of the Unitarian world—Emerson turned his back upon the pulpit forever and adopted the lecture platform and the printed page as his avenues to the ear and heart of the public.

The memory of all this must have been present to our young minister—for at Cambridge he had many times sat in the presence of the amiable heretic and drunk in his wisdom and poetic diction—but he had not yet found his intellectual growth or else the influence of Swedenborg and Thomas Lake Harris were a check as yet upon his skepticism. Let one read the sermons delivered at Austin in 1893 and later, noting the scorn of all formalism in religion and the rejection of all that smacks of ecclesiasticism, and a wide divergence will be manifest between the young man, facing for the first time the breaking up of old traditions, and the old man, ripened by nearly a half century of study and reflection.

Nor is it a just matter of marvel that our youthful pastor, entering thus upon his first ministry, should have clung lovingly still to the old forms and beliefs which, as his mind expanded, he was wholly to reject. It is a tribute, indeed, to his native strength of mind and power of thought that he grew so rapidly, and no less marked a tribute to his character that as rapidly as he grew and as the larger thought took hold of his being just that rapidly he declared his new belief, thinking nothing of what consequences might ensue but thinking merely of his duty to declare the truth as he saw it.

The state of Unitarianism itself at that early date was not one propitious to liberality, as liberality would now be understood. It was only among the younger and more ardent that the influence of Emerson and Parker was telling markedly and the younger and more ardent were not the directing heads of the church nor the dominant factors in molding the destinies of the Unitarian movement.

Beginning with 1835, we are told by George Willis Cooke in his *Unitarianism in America*, the more liberal Unitarians were increasingly active.

“Hodge’s Club held its meetings. ‘The Dial’ was published, ‘Brook Farm’ lived its brief day of a reformed humanity, Parker began his preaching in Boston and the more radical young Unitarian preachers were bravely seeking for a religion natural to man and authenticated by

the inner witness of the truth. The agitation thus started went on with growing insistence of statement and earnestness of feeling. The new doctrine gained the interest of the young in increasing number. In pulpit and on the platform, in newspapers and magazines, this new teaching was uttered for the world's hearing. The breeze thus created seems to have grown into a gale but the *Christian Register* and the *Christian Examiner* gave almost no indication that it had blown their way.***** All at once, however, in 1853 it came into the greatest prominence as the result of action taken by the *Unitarian Association* and thenceforth for a quarter of a century it was never absent as a disturbing element in the intellectual and religious life of the Unitarian body. The early Unitarians were believers in the supernatural and in the miracles of the New Testament. They accepted without question ideas on the subject that had been entertained by all Protestants from the days of Luther and Calvin. When, therefore, Parker and the Transcendentalists began to do away the miraculous foundations of Christianity many Unitarians were quite unprepared to accept their theories."

Mr. Cooke tells us of the resolutions of the American Unitarian Association in 1853, in which the body declared its belief in the divine origin of Christianity and the divine authority of the gospels as founded on a special and miraculous interposition of God, and he explains that the activities of the Association were interfered with because the conservative churches objected to the presence of radicals in the Association and the radicals to the presence of conservatives.

"This controversy was emphasized by that arising from the reform movements of the day, especially the agitation against slavery. Almost without exception the radicals belonged to the anti-slavery party, while the conservative churches were generally opposed to this agitation. As a result anti-slavery efforts became a serious cause of discord in the Unitarian churches and helped to cripple the resources of the Association and when, as the climax, Civil War came on the Association was brought to a condition of almost desperate poverty."

This digression and these quotations will afford a fair light in which to read the passages of the ordination sermon. Young as yet in his chosen vocation, and with this tumult everywhere about him, the freedom of his first sermon from the liberality of opinion which marked his later discourses can be understood. It was not ripeness of view, it was the tremendous capacity for growth, which was the promising equipment of the new preacher.

Truth to say, however, it was not in its tone that the ordination sermon is chiefly important. Its significance lies in a direction altogether different. It is in the ringing statement of the minister's

attitude toward public questions that what is at once an original and a courageous note is struck.

"Whenever a moral principle is involved in a public question, whether of trade, or politics or legislation or social life, the Christian minister as a champion of public morals is bound to speak and act—to speak and act kindly, carefully, dispassionately, indeed, but with all the manly freedom of one who is responsible only to his own conscience and to his God."

This, in very sooth, was the keynote of his life. In these words we read a trumpet call to his own soul to which, ever and again, in his long and useful and by no means uneventful life, a fiery response was heard, giving assurance that his words on this occasion were a solemn pledge of fidelity to the highest ideal of intellectual rectitude and courage. The time was but a few months distant when he should give token to his congregation that he meant just what he said, and a few years later, in the great crisis which tried men's souls, his voice was to sound high and true when others should speak with trembling accents; but, as yet, perhaps, the young man foresaw little occasion for any signal exercise of that independence of thought and speech which he bespoke for himself.

The occasion came when, in the election held in March, 1858, respectable citizens of Dover, following a practice common enough in the politics of that day, sought with money and drink support for their candidates. It is plain that these things passing before his very eyes—for the first time perhaps in his life—set the soul of the young pastor aflame. In his pulpit the Sunday following, March 13th, his congregation heard from him, in words direct and at times even stinging, what was at once a rebuke and a call to a nobler ideal.

"I shall abstain from all political or secular discussion. I have nothing to do with that here. This place is for the enunciation of God's eternal Truth and for the application of its maxims to every phase of human work. Alas for the nation whose prophets prophesy falsely or flatteringly or equivocally; who shrink from declaring in all its fullness their holy message or tone it down for the sake of peace or whatever else. The law of God may have faded out of American politics but it has not yet faded out of the sky nor out of the earth and if we delay in reading it it may yet be written up and down our land in letters of fire."

Then, growing more pointed and specific, our flaming monitor directs an accusing finger at those who have "dispensed through the town the double infamy of drunkenness and bribes," and says:

"Men of property and standing, and even with religious pretensions, have declared that there is no higher law of morality—not even a lower law of decency—in politics; that there is no room at the polls for the gospel of Jesus but only for the shameless gospel of expediency. Temperance men who might with one determined word have closed every drinkery in this city on the day of election, and have banished liquor from sight and ordinary reach, consented to render rum as free as water to all comers. You know that there were men in this town whom God had endowed with but slight power of resisting temptation; men who were usually found sober and who do not seek temptation if it is kept out of their path but upon whose untrained appetite the presence and sight of liquor acts as does upon the tiger the sight of blood. You thought it a light thing to tempt these your weaker brethren though God out of Heaven has rolled these awful words 'Cursed be he who puteth the cup to his neighbor's lips.' Your liquor bills, for last week are not all settled yet. Jehovah, who does not admit the plea of expediency, and who notes every stumbling block put in the way of the weaker of his children, *has a bill against some of us that no bank account can balance.*"

A good start this, right surely, for a young preacher—a safe harbinger of loyal devotion in future to the highest behests of duty. They were not mistaken words, those beautiful ones of Francis and Frothingham—this youthful minister has sleeping within him the celestial fires and shall speak when occasion serves like a very prophet of old! There is a clarion sharpness in these words which speaks of an unusual soul, a soul cast in heroic mold, and which shall show its strength and greatness in every crisis. No fear is here, no timid thought of compromise, no misgivings; the evil and the evil-doer are before him and with prophetic swiftness he presses his trumpet to his lips and peals a long-resounding blast, announcing the evil and recalling the evil-doer to the path of right. There is a grandeur in these words that was to find a solemn commentary a few years later when the supreme crisis of his life should confront him and through every epoch of his career they were to echo and re-echo!

Of the early period of his pastorate at Dover a number of published sermons exist as memorials which may be dealt with at this point by way of conclusion to the present chapter. The earliest, perhaps, was one upon the subject of *Inspiration* published evidently in the year of his ordination by Crosby, Nichols & Company of Boston. No copy of this pamphlet has come to the notice of the present writer but the original manuscript of the sermon shows by

a pencil notation that it was published in a sixteen page pamphlet by that firm and that five hundred copies of it were made. Of the next published discourse, however—the next, at least, so far as we have been able to discover—a copy exists in the Boston Public Library and is among the books and pamphlets bequeathed to that library by Theodore Parker and received by the institution on October 31, 1861. The pamphlet had been printed by George Wadleigh, printer at Dover, in 1858, and evidently found its way soon after into the library of Mr. Parker. The style of this sermon is somewhat involved. It lacks the clearness and crispness which characterize his later sermons. The discourse, however—in reality a sermon upon immortality, though entitled *The Human Soul*—is finely reasoned and suggests by its tender touches the beautiful sermon *The Life Hereafter*, written some forty years later and begun beside the dead body of his wife, though lacking the latter's pure, chaste, Saxon English. Another copy of this discourse is to be found among the celebrated Waterman Collection of pamphlets in the Congressional Library at Washington. In this collection also appears a sermon entitled *Divine Sonship of Man*, printed by G. Wadleigh, Dover, New Hampshire, in 1858, and bound together with sermons and addresses by Emerson, Theodore Parker and Ezra Ripley. In this discourse, by its tone and cast of phrase, we get for the first time suggestions and forehints of the thinker and preacher as he was to be when ripened by the years and we detect those characteristics of style and thought which were in time to become a part of the very man. Doctrinally, however, the discourse lacks the spirit of the later sermons—there is an unmistakable lack of ripe conviction upon the question of the Incarnation and one might even suspect that the young clergyman was not wholly free from that disposition for ascribing a Divine origin to the Bible which in his maturer years he cast off wholly.